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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the media's handling of education and its portrayal in the media. Reporting of educational initiatives, especially those emanating from government action, often becomes part of the debate surrounding such events and perhaps influences their outcome. The question is asked about how much do journalists become players themselves in the educational debate, rather than being observers and reporting what happens. The question further becomes, are journalists willing or reluctant participants, self-operating or being managed from outside forces? Brief case studies are used to examine the relationship between the media and educational initiatives. Through the case studies, the paper makes the case that education has become highly political over the years, influencing political parties and election campaigns. To project into the future, it is suggested that education will be the biggest spending function and will involve the interests of the most people under a Scottish parliament which will, by necessity, be much smaller and have a narrowly focused media spotlight on it. National organizations in the education world will find themselves more publicly accountable and must be more readily available to the media. There is optimism for the changes to come with the new parliamentary structure and a greater openness for debate. (EH)

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CES CENTRE *for* EDUCATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

SPARE THE MESSENGER: TELLING IT AS IT HAPPENS

BY

WILLIS PICKARD

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The University *of* Edinburgh

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ISES Annual Lecture

SPARE THE MESSENGER: TELLING IT AS IT HAPPENS

by

WILLIS PICKARD
(Editor, Times Educational Supplement Scotland)

To celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Centre *for* Educational Sociology

24 November 1997

It is uncommon for a journalist to be on this side of the house. We are more usually in the audience armed with a notebook listening to a speaker and cursing him or her for not having had a prepared text and therefore forcing one to rely on shorthand or in my case on abbreviated longhand which becomes incomprehensible to read back afterwards. Being asked to talk rather than listen is also an uncomfortable experience, the same as is felt by television and radio interviewers when the tables are turned on them. Kenneth Clarke interviewing a wary John Humphreys on the Today programme is a case in point.

My own sense of unease is not lessened because I know the background to these lectures. About a year ago I sat in this room at the very first of them. The inaugural series were aimed at exploring issues in Scottish education 500 years after the introduction, nominal introduction perhaps, of a role for the state in schooling. This is a relatively new lecture theatre with up-to-date technical facilities and ISES was then brand new. Nisbet Gallacher, the newly retired HMSCI, was the speaker and he thought he would illustrate his talk with a photograph of the text of the 1496 Act which instituted compulsory education. It was rather ironical therefore to watch the technology of back projection struggling with the script of some 500-year-old Government clerk. Nisbet's arguments were commendably precise and clear. The 1496 Act was not.

I will not trouble the technicians. A journalist forced to his feet usually prefers talk and chalk without the chalk and so it will be with me this evening. I am very grateful for the opportunity to sound off on a theme which has long interested me and to an audience whose involvement in education is at least as intimate as mine but those experience and perspectives are very different. It will therefore be interesting to compare my conclusions with yours, and that, too, may turn out uncomfortably for me.

Principally, I want to look at the media's handling of education. Hence the reference to the "sparing the messenger" in my title. You will recall that the phrase "shoot the messenger" implies blaming the bearer of ill tidings rather than the source of the bad news. I want to address the phenomenon in a specific sense. By that I mean the way in which the reporting of educational initiatives especially those emanating from Government action, becomes part of the debate surrounding such events and perhaps influences their outcome. In other words, far from being mere observers and reporting what happens well or badly, fairly or unfairly, how much do journalists become players themselves? And if they do, are they willing or reluctant, are they self-operating or are they being managed from outside?

This lecture and another later in the session are intended to mark an anniversary, not of 500 years but of a more modest quarter century. I have know the work of the Centre for Educational Sociology for all the time I have been editor of the TESS and that is 20 years next month. When I moved from being features editor of The Scotsman in 1977 the CES was five years old. The first of its pioneering Young People's Surveys was also in 1977. It and its distinguished staff have featured regularly in the columns

of my own paper and in the wider media over the years. In last Friday's edition of the paper David Raffe looked at the history of the Centre and the ups and downs of its relationship with central government in particular. Some of these vicissitudes the TESS has chronicled over the years and I am glad that David was able to strike such a positive note about the future of the centre within ISES and soon within the wider educational community that will be formed between the university and Moray House.

Early in my editorship Andrew McPherson tried to tell me about the discipline that is educational research. Looking elsewhere in the current leadership of ISES, I remember George Thomson, who was then at Moray House, endeavouring to unravel to me as a newcomer to educational journalism the latest thinking about special education in the immediate wake of the Warnock report and the Scottish HMI report on the subject.

The CES has existed during a period of immense change in Scottish education, a period in which according to some commentators the ideologies of ministers were to the fore in dictating the passage of events. Therefore in using some examples from the last 20 years I will be straddling most of the period of the CES's existence.

My plan is to examine the relationship between the media and educational initiatives through a few brief case studies. I will then offer some thoughts on what the changes will mean for educational democracy especially looking ahead to the Scottish Parliament. I believe that the coming of the Parliament will alter the way educational institutions operate and the attitude of the media to them. I will conclude with a thought about how that might affect educational research, which is clearly a principal concern of ISES and the CES

The first big controversy that occurred after I joined the TESS in December 1977 was the Government's plans to reduce the number of colleges of education. It was a Labour Government that was responsible, one with a small majority - or rather no majority at all since it depended on the Lib-Lab pact for its existence. In Scotland the Labour Party was being hounded by a rampant SNP. The plan to throw into reverse the previous expansion of colleges of education, which had risen to 10 in number, was brought about by clear evidence that the teacher shortages which had led to expansion were over and too many students on teacher training would simply produce teacher unemployment.

Two things rapidly became clear. First, decisions on which colleges would close would be taken on political grounds, not educational ones. That was made abundantly clear when with Labour having left the job largely undone, the successor Conservative Government insisted that Craigie College in Ayr would not be among the victims. It was in the constituency of George Younger, the Secretary of State who did not have a hugely comfortable majority. But of course the media could not be given the impression that electoral politics were to resolve an educational quandary.

The Government had two approaches in its news handling. The first was one that came naturally to the SED, by which I mean the ministers' officials. They sought to stifle debate by giving away as little information as possible about the criteria for decisions and any consultations which were being undertaken. Legitimate journalistic inquiries, many of them prompted by the concerns of college staff and students and accompanying the save-our-college campaigns which had been set up, were met with a brick wall of silence. Normally friendly officials went into purdah, though none as far as I am aware went as far as to continue the Indian theme and fling themselves on the funeral pyre.

The second ploy was to manufacture all sorts of fine-sounding justifications for an eventual outcome which had little or nothing to do with education.

So Realpolitik exists in Scottish education as it does in areas of government which might be thought redder in tooth and claw - defence contract for example. As I said a moment ago, that was one of two things that the colleges of education episode showed me. The other was that the media were not the only people on the wrong side of the information wire. Journalistic nosiness that might produce embarrassing stories had to be stopped. Well, fair enough. But any more respectable attempt to find out what was going on was similarly turned away, and that applied equally once decisions had been taken and the controversy had become history. Researchers interested in looking into the episode as sociologists in order to reflect on the processes of decision making were given as bloody a nose as the reporters. Non-communication was the order of the day.

Civil servants are never happy when asked to explain publicly the actions they take on behalf of ministers or the advice they offer their political masters. But the Thatcher years saw a new tack in handling the media and it affected the educational agenda as much as other areas of policy. Politics became a battle for hearts and minds, and journalists would be recruited to the colours. I would go as far as to argue that attracting and retaining the support of the media was highly influential in Scottish education in the 1980s. I would even argue that the outcome of the struggle for the media's support played its part in the result of the General Election earlier this year.

In terms of education the Thatcher years may be divided in two, with the 1987 election marking the division. The first eight years were not without their conflicts. They were marked, after all, by a two-year teachers' dispute, the longest in history. But there is a difference between a breakdown in industrial relations, which the dispute represented, and an ideological conflict that involved the wider community as well as professionals. Here is where parent power enters the story, and because there are 1.5 million parents in Scotland, arguments about their role clearly transcend the education profession.

The role of the media therefore becomes important, and not just in a battle for hearts and minds. It has to be remembered throughout this period and into the most recent years that if education is at the top of the political agenda and involve the wider

public, it becomes of interest to the media in more than political terms. Circulation of newspapers, viewing figures for television programmes become important factors in deciding how much attention is given to the subject. It is not only the intrinsic interest of educational politics which contributed to the greater amount of space given to education in newspapers and to more air-time for the subject, including special programmes on the day of major initiatives such as the publication of the findings of the inquiry which ended the teachers' dispute. There is an element of commercialism as well, an appeal to the mass audience. That is not meant as a pejorative comment, or for that matter a laudatory one. It is simply a fact.

The whole of the Thatcher period can be seen as an appeal to the consumer to take power from the producer, and for parents to gain precedence over the education professionals, be they local government leaders, teacher trade unionists or what might be called fellow-travelling academics (fellow travellers certainly with other self-interested groups and perhaps politically as well in Tory demonology). Ironically, the first and arguably the most significant initiative towards parent power was not particularly controversial. The first Thatcher administration brought in parental choice of schools. Like the right to buy a council house, this had its popular appeal. The rigid catchment areas favoured by the Labour Government, especially in places like Edinburgh, had been unpopular, leading to court cases and bad publicity. The right to choose a school was and remains popular, although it has led to distortions in school rolls and problems for local authorities. Like sale of council houses, it has brought the Conservatives none of the electoral benefits which had been calculated into the decision to legislate in these areas of social policy. The voters are an ungrateful lot, and it has to be said that the media in evaluating the record of the Conservative administrations have rarely given credit where credit may have been due.

That is because the media had turned against the Government for other educational reasons. In 1987 the arrival of the young Michael Forsyth as education minister was portrayed in the media as marking a watershed. He brought ideological commitment to educational policy, not a normal characteristic of ministers, certainly not of Tories for whom ideology usually implied socialism. The media frequently jump to premature hyperbole, but ten years on, I think the watershed description remains valid. Forsyth sought to take on the educational establishment on behalf of consumers. He claimed to speak for parents' interests and he was happy that the media should be involved in the cause. He would rather be attacked than ignored, but as a public relations man himself, he thought he could use journalists to highlight his aims and speak to the general public in disregard of how established educational interests like the EIS might - predictably - react.

Journalists saw he was good copy: he knew his mind, he could argue his case and discomfit his opponents. But they soon realised that however skilled his performances in the House of Commons and in television studios, he antagonised those whom he sought to woo as much as those whom he regarded as opponents. Therefore in the battle for hearts and minds, the media became the vehicle for public opinion against

him rather than the tool with which he thought he could gain leverage to overcome his party's minority position on the Scottish benches at Westminster and in local government. The media was to bite the hand that fed it.

In the autumn of 1987 and throughout 1988 I remember writing editorials in favour of moderation. By that I do not mean relying on the archetypical leader-writer's device of stating on the one hand, followed by on the other hand and, switching metaphors and horses in midstream, ending up impaled on the fence of imprecision. It means, I hope, that I was offering what I thought was practical and sensible advice to the new minister for education while all around him were pouring invective on his head.

He had decided that parental rights were to be advanced by setting up school boards where the parents as consumers of education would have the right to share in the running of their children's school and if necessary bring the professionals ie the head and the teachers to book. Admittedly that was to be the second stage of school board jurisdiction, the so-called ceiling powers which they could aspire to. The ideology of the Conservative Right in which established interests - in this case teacher unions and local authorities - are hemmed in by consumers exercising new powers was one which appealed to the young Forysth. He legislated according to the gospel of pamphleteers who belonged with him to the No Turning Back group of MPs. Their ideas were devised according to an agenda from south of the border. Many of the MPs - again including Forsyth - came for backgrounds in PR. They wanted not only to advance the right-wing agenda but to be heard doing so.

The proposals for school boards and especially their ceiling powers met with universal rejection across Scotland. When the first election for parent members came, the way to get elected was to state opposition to the notion of parents taking on the running of the school. The controversy brought some good candidates to the election, but the whole episode was unnecessary. If only Forysth had paid attention to Scottish opinion, or for that matter, I shamelessly claim, to my leaders. The point was that all four parties had fought the 1987 election on the need to reform the existing unwieldy and unsatisfactory school councils. There was a wide measure of agreement about what was needed - a board or council for every school. The parents who were eventually elected to the boards represented that consensus. Forsyth by dressing up his own proposals in ideological language and using Parliament and the media to see the legislation in these terms threw away an opportunity to enact useful reform without antagonising everyone.

He queered his own pitch. Whatever he did subsequently was treated with deep suspicion. He always argued his case with skill. True, he used the built-in Tory majority of English MPs to get measures through against the overwhelming majority of Scottish votes but frequently he bested Labour, SNP and Alliance (or Liberal Democrat) in debate. And he sought out allies in the press to take the battle directly to the people. Just as he hoped that parents would become a voice for true educational opinion rather than that of Labour spokesmen in the unions or local government, so he

hoped that there was an audience or newspaper readership out there waiting to be rallied to the cause.

For the first time in my experience the spin doctors tried their black arts in Scottish education. The Sunday Post, not previously noted for either its incisive political reporting or its deep interest in education, was given exclusive stories because it was one of the few papers to continue to support the Tories. The Scottish edition of the Sunday Times was edited by Gerry Malone, in one of his periods as a former Tory MP. A close pal of Andrew Neil, he could be counted on to publish articles rubbishing the state of schools which therefore needed a dose of Thatcher's medicine. Other newspapers could be counted on to use exclusive stories fed them on a lobby basis - that is privately and exclusively - but they would attack Forsyth and his party in their editorials. The Scotsman had for long been derided and dismissed by the Tories. They were upset, however, that the Herald, the voice of Glasgow business, should turn against them so vehemently.

In his dealings with journalists on a personal basis Forsyth never forgot his PR training. He would try to influence how they handled a story, his officials would be berated for the way the media treated his speeches and initiatives and through the Scottish Information Office would pass on their master's displeasure to editors and education reporters. But he remained approachable and usually friendly when dealing with journalists on a one-to-one basis. He demonised members of campaign groups set up to oppose his plans. He never did so with journalists. Indeed because he knew his own forensic skills he was always willing to discuss or debate with them.. He could be witty and self deprecating in private and would happily talk about anything. One of the most entertaining dinner parties that I have attended hosted by a Government minister was Forsyth's gathering for education and health specialists. in Abbey Lodge at Holyrood.

Unfortunately for him neither his charm initiatives nor his forays into spin doctoring could repair the damage he had caused himself. After the school boards legislation came the Self-Governing Schools Bill. Only two schools have taken advantage and opted out. Then there was national testing. In refreshing my memory of the events before the 1992 election I am indebted to one of Forsyth s demons. But in saying that I have supped with the devil, it is in the shape of Judith Gillespie who was convenor of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council and was a columnist of mine on the TESS. She has just written a so far unpublished personal memoire of the cleverly organised and ultimately successful campaign against national testing when it took the form of proposed tests of every child in primaries 4 and 7. In her detailed account, which she links with the earlier campaign she and other parent leaders were involved in against Forsyth's concept of school boards she says that the role of the press was very important, and certainly with both the school boards campaign and the later one on national testing the interest and support of newspapers was invoked by parent leaders at an early stage.

National testing was an interesting battle because it was one on which the Government might have counted on at least a large measure of parent support. There was and there still is concern about standards in schools. Parents, themselves products of a school system which set store by exams, have never been too concerned about regular tests. Indeed they still often ask teachers on parents' evening not how their child is getting on but how he is placed in the pecking order of the class. So ministers who realised full well their minority position in opting out might have expected greater success with national tests. It was, however, the initiative of parents' groups in opposing the tests which allowed teachers to turn their own professional concerns into a boycott. Without parents withdrawing children the teachers' rebellion would probably have failed or would have been depicted by the Government as evidence of a profession dedicated to keeping parents at bay and in the dark.

But once again the propaganda battle in the media was won by amateur, ad hoc groups of parents over the Government's professional communicators. The poor standing of the Government in Scotland and Forsyth's reputation for unnecessary meddling helped unite opinion, but clever handling of the media was also influential. With help from Cosla a survey of all P4 and P7 families was organised, and the results of the questionnaire - returned by an impressive 50 per cent showed irrefutable levels of opposition to testing. This was bound to interest the media, which was the intention. It cut the ground from under the Government which had argued that teachers and activist parents were unrepresentative of grassroots opinion. The survey and the widespread boycott of testing came just before the General Election. Therefore they had clear political as well as educational significance. The only subsequent surprise was in the election result since most people had predicted a Labour victory, but at least the re-elected Government with a new education minister realised it had been beaten on the tests and immediately reformed them.

So much then for my case studies which date from about 1978 to 1992. What significance do they hold? Well, for a start they show that education had become highly party political, for probably the first time. It is little wonder that the interest of the media was stirred up and that in turn the media were targeted by campaigners on both sides of the various debates. The politicisation had two origins: first, education had been dragged up the political agenda, starting with Jim Callaghan's Ruskin College speech and continuing through the Thatcher years. I do not need to remind you of its continuing importance in this year's election campaign and in the early months of the Labour Government.

Allied to its political importance was the extension of the groups affected by the debates. Not now just professional educators and minorities reading the quality press, but all parents because they were being called to greater involvement by the Government and were wooed by the Government's opponents. Political and educational debates overlapped. The 1980s saw the longest industrial dispute involving teachers. The effects of that on children's education were bound to involve parents, but their interest was also being canvassed in educational matters affecting

schools as well as on whether the school was open for business. One controversy played off another. The teachers' campaign to retain parent support over two years of disruption had its effect on the campaign about school boards and especially the opposition to national testing which saw the parent-teacher alliance reborn. As recently as two years ago with the great march and rally in Edinburgh against the education cuts the concert of effort was still there. And in all these campaigns because they were political and national, the media had to be used. In turn the media with an eye to selling papers or attracting viewers could not but be impressed by mass action.

Let me recapitulate where my argument has got us so far. I have looked briefly at three case studies - the story of the closure of colleges of education from the late seventies and early eighties, the school boards saga from later in the decade and the opposition to national testing before the 1992 election. I have contrasted what I might call the traditional attitude to the media in the earliest case - the shutters going up and a reluctance to give anything away - with the later cases in which the media had a role in the development of the debates and was used by both sides in the campaigns to win public support.

You may have noticed that in my choice of examples I avoided more than a passing reference to the two-year teachers' dispute. Although that was clearly a main event of the Thatcher years in Scotland, it belongs to the history of industrial relations more than to education. Therefore the part the media played there - and it was an important one in ensuring that the teachers did not lose public sympathy - does not fit into my theme which is how educational debates as opposed to political or industrial ones came to be played out in a public arena to an extent previously unparalleled.

I want now to draw some conclusions about the media and national educational debates. I have just used the word "unparalleled" in describing the events of the eighties and early nineties. Let me explain what I mean with a brief reference to educational history. There have been plenty of educational controversies in Scotland's history. I confine my thoughts to the era of widespread adult suffrage and readily accessible daily newspapers . I cannot think of a case before the 1980s in which a major educational debate was played out in the mass media to the extent that has happened recently.

Think of the controversies dealt with by George Davie in his two books about the "democratic intellect". The fierce arguments between believers in the traditional generalist view of Scottish education and the modernisers who wanted a more specialised curriculum, more emphasis on honours degrees in the universities, the use of Highers as a way of winnowing talent which could be encouraged through higher education - all these debates were carried on for decades. They did, as Davie points out, feature in the correspondence columns of The Scotsman and were conducted on a high intellectual plane, but they did not become part of the determining political debate of the day. Despite the interest of Scots in education, they were not major election issues in the manner of church issues throughout the nineteenth century and

economic and industrial matters in our own times. In other words educational argument was, broadly, confined to educationists.

Paradoxically, in England, where education was supposedly not so valued by the mass of the people as in Scotland or Wales, it could determine the fate of Governments. Think of the previous times this century that the Tories suffered a crash on the scale of this year's defeat. Would 1906 have been so disastrous a defeat without the controversy during Balfour's premiership about church schools which so antagonised Nonconformist opinion? In 1944 the rising Tory star Rab Butler pushed through major educational legislation. In terms of domestic politics it was highly controversial, again largely because of the place of church schools. It probably made no difference to the outcome of the 1945 election but it shows the centrality of English education to electoral politics.

You will by now realise that I believe the actions of the Conservative Governments of the eighties and nineties on educational matters helped to create an impression in the minds of Scottish voters which spilled over into other areas of government and ultimately provoked a hostile judgement in the ballot boxes. When education equals politics, the role of the media becomes central. Education has moved out of the arena of specialist comment and debate - the arena occupied for example by my own newspaper - and takes centre stage.

I said at the beginning that I would try to look ahead to the position under a Scottish parliament. Two things are obvious. The first is that education will be the biggest spending function and will involve the interests of the most people. It is bound to be more frequently debated than it has been at Westminster where Scottish educational bills are severely rationed in number by the parliamentary business managers and questions to ministers occur only within the short period devoted one a month or every six weeks to the whole of the Scottish Office. It is no accident that most of those interested in education have been keen on devolution if for no other reason than the way it has been treated at Westminster. It will certainly loom large on Calton Hill or at Leith or the Haymarket.

The second point about the new constitutional arrangements is that we will a' ken yin another. The political community - that is, commentators as well as decision makers at central and local government level - will be small. We are bound to get to know one another and bump into each other regularly. I think this will have two effects. It will mean that Government officials will not be able to keep their distance and anonymity as they have in the past. They will have to be more upfront, and I regard that as an advantage. But it also means that the media spotlight will be narrowly focused - 129 MSPs, a few hundred senior officials, a troop of lobbyists, a limited range of potentially controversial spheres of debate. Education, having come downstage into the spotlight, as I have shown, will not be allowed to retreat to the wings.

The effects of that will be wide ranging. At the lowest will MSPs - the rent-a-quote brigade, the Teresa Gormans - want to make political capital out of minor rows in schools? The usual stuff about the English class reading books with naughty words, nothing to do with national legislators but that won't prevent them trying to put the education minister on the spot, and certainly will not prevent them using the media to publicise their concerns, or to be more accurate, themselves. The media will respond happily, for minor rows make good stories.

I think, too, that national organisations in the education world will find themselves more publicly accountable. The media will expect them to be available far more than at present. There will be an appetite for news and debate which the parliament itself will not always satisfy, and there will be more journalists on the Edinburgh political beat. So I can envisage more publicity for a body like the SQA. Ron Tuck may become a media personality. Certainly I think national educational bodies will have to look to their public presentation. They have the opportunity to be more proactive as well as having to be more reactive. I recently spoke to the General Teaching Council and that was my message.

Hopefully, with a higher profile will come greater autonomy and greater attention to the purposes and achievements of public bodies. Much of the discussion about the nature of the parliament centres on the need for openness. Let us hope that extends to associated public bodies as well. With openness should go receptivity. Here there may be an optimistic message for the research community. Will greater heed be paid to the findings of education research? Will academics and practitioners, academics and policy makers be brought into closer co-operation? Will there be money for research that goes beyond the evaluation of Government initiatives?

I think there are grounds for optimism. But there is also a lurking danger. We know - nobody knows better than the CES - the risk of Government seeing research as a tool of its own interests. Funding goes accordingly, and woe betide the freethinker. Since I believe that education will remain at the heart of Scottish politics, there must be a danger that the Government imposes an orthodoxy, that everyone has to sing from the same hymn sheet. In addition Scotland could fall into parochialism, neglecting what goes on outwith its borders. I believe that is the greatest danger we face. The media have a role in preventing it happen. So of course does the research community, but funding might be restricted to projects which suit the Government. That would be intellectually enervating and before long nationally disastrous.

If such tendencies appear, there will be controversies and fights ahead. A t least you know that the media will always be happy to publicise them, not just because we believe in the new Scotland and expect to thrive in it but because, speaking for my own paper, there is nothing like a good row between politicians and academics to set the blood tingling. I hope, however, that the CES and ISES, if they find themselves tangling with the powers-that-be, emerge triumphant just as they have emerged in good heart from battles of the past and are able to be in celebratory mood this evening.